



GENERAL GUINEA PIG CARE

Guinea pigs are lively, gentle creatures that live approximately 5 – 7 years. They are considered a prey species which means they feel much safer within a group. Creating a secure living environment involves providing hiding places within their enclosure with items such as cardboard boxes, lots of grassy hay or Timothy Hay tunnels. The enclosure should provide adequate space for the number of guinea pigs sharing this space, shelter from wind and rain and protection from predators. It is ideal to have the hutch secured to the ground, with open powder-coated or plastic-coated wire sides for ventilation. The floor of the enclosure should have open exposure to the grass and access to a flat wooden platform elevated off the ground. Wire floors are not recommended as they usually cause ulcers on the base of the feet and treated pine or zinc galvanized enclosures can be toxic if guinea pigs chew them. Newspaper and Timothy hay or grassy hay can be used as bedding, for warmth and to keep the floor dry, and should be changed daily. During Summer it is advised to offer extra shade with lots of ventilation to keep them cool. Ice bricks in the water or wet towels over the enclosure can help with evaporative cooling. Plastic hides should be **TAKEN OUT** of the enclosure during Summer due to the potential for **OVERHEATING**.

Guinea pigs in the wild graze on grass high on the mountaintops of South America so their diet in captivity should reflect this. We advise a diet consisting primarily of grassy hay such as Timothy Hay, fresh grass, fresh vegetables and very minor exposure to prepared foods. Average daily intake should include approximately **75% grass and grassy hay and the remaining 25% in Oxbow Cavi Cuisine pellets® (one tablespoon) and a mixture of red, green and yellow vegetables (one tablespoon)**. Recommended vegetables include pumpkin, lettuce, cucumber, capsicum, celery, watermelon, apple peel, carrot peel. Leaves high in calcium should be fed infrequently (spinach, silverbeet, parsley) except for young guinea pigs and pregnant females.

Excessive dietary calcium, or more importantly, improper calcium: phosphorus ratio in the diet can lead to stones or excessive crystalline "sludge" developing in the bladder which can affect urination. Lucern hay has excessive phosphorus relative to calcium which will eventually lead to this crystal formation if fed daily. This syndrome can become life threatening if the guinea pig becomes dehydrated. Grass should be provided in an area with no dog or cat access and no pesticide contamination. Fresh water can be supplied in a sipper bottle or bowl depending on the guinea pig's preference.

Guinea pigs are very precocious creatures and are born fully haired and will start nibbling solids within a few days of birth. They require milk for up to the first three weeks of life and colostrum is very important for the development of

immunity in the first few days of life. They are usually weaned by about 3 weeks old. Breeding sows should have their first litter BEFORE 6 MONTHS OLD or the pubic symphysis will most likely be permanently fused and the pups would require delivery by caesarian section. The gestation period is 59 – 72 days.

Frequent handling from a young age is recommended to reduce anxiety and when picked up, their body should be supported under the front legs and at the base of the rump and carried close to your body. Females are able to breed from 8 weeks old, males from 12 weeks old. Castration of males is possible for prevention of breeding before these ages if required. De-sexing of females is less routine but can be done at under 600g bodyweight with minimal surgical risk. Usually a harem structure of one male to one or more females is recommended. If several males are to be housed together they can be castrated to reduce aggression.

Primary health concerns for guinea pigs can include:

Scurvy: Vitamin C deficiency leading to poor skin and coat condition. Non-breeding guinea pigs require 25-50mg/kg of Vitamin C daily which can be provided with daily access to fresh guinea pig pellets and yellow/red/green vegetables or provided orally with a Vitamin C supplement.

Sick, recovering or breeding guinea pigs, and pigs with skin conditions, dental issues, or immunosuppression require 50-100mg/kg daily of oral vitamin C.

Skin mites: cause hair loss and dry scurfy, scabby skin. This condition is often seen amongst groups of guinea pigs, usually associated with poor nutrition, poor husbandry and overcrowding/stress. They are readily treatable and diagnosed by removing a hair or two from the skin which is examined under the microscope or by clinical response to treatment. Vitamin C is important for recovery.

Dental Disease: is a common problem with guinea pigs that have not been provided with adequate daily exposure to coarse high fibre foods including grassy or Timothy hay. Overgrown teeth can lead to entrapment of the tongue and severe ulceration of the tongue and mucous membranes of the cheeks. The teeth can be kept at correct alignment and length with constant chewing of high fibre grass/hay and multi-seeded fruit tree branches such as apple, orange, mandarin, lemon etc.

Diarrhoea: soft faeces are often a product of inadequate fibre intake or lack of gastrointestinal bacteria. Other contributors can be parasites such as protozoa, coccidia or nematodes (worms). A faecal examination by a veterinarian can rule these out.

Pododermatitis is infection and swelling of the feet usually caused by wire flooring and inadequate diet. It can also occur during periods of other physiological stress. Most often it requires surgical debridement of the infection and treatment with antibiotics, anti-inflammatories and dressings of the feet. It can be prevented by providing adequate housing and a balanced diet with Vitamin C and ensuring minimal environmental stress (overcrowding).